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STATUS OF JAIN WOMEN IN TAMIL NADU WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *NISIDHI* HERO STONES

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Introduction

The ultimate goal of a human being is to attain liberation. This state of liberation differs from each human's faith and belief. In fact, religion plays a prominent role in shaping the faith and mind of any person. Jainism, like every religion, has its own philosophy for death. In Jainism, liberation can be attained only through giving up all desires such as assets, relationships, possessions and a desire for long life. Any human being who voluntarily takes a vow to observe fasting unto death is assumed to be a hero in Jainism.

When hero stones were erected for the purpose of saving lives or for sacrificing themselves for others good deeds or causes the *Nisidhi* hero stones were erected for a person's courageous act of self sacrificing in a non violent manner for the attainment of liberation. This practice in Jainism is believed to have been followed from the historic period. The practice was known with different names such as *Nisidhi*, *Nishadi*, *Nishidhiga*, *Niseedhigai*, *Sallekhana*, *Samlekhana*, *Samadhi*, *Sandhana* and *Marana*.

Various researches and studies on the *Nisidhi* hero stones helps in understanding the beliefs and practices of Jains but when it comes to the distribution of these herostones, Tamil Nadu holds the least number of *Nisidhi* hero stones, especially those belonging to women. Women in the Tamil country always played a significant role in the society and administration of various kingdoms that were present in the past. Sangam period literature and later inscriptions stand as evidence for their contribution. Though there is much literary evidence to prove the contribution of Jaina women in Jain religion and society, there unfortunately is inadequate archaeological evidence that can be counted upon as sources.

Sallekhana was not only observed by the monks and nuns but also by the householders who belonged to Jainism. Taking vows and *vratas*, were considered as the destination of their lives. Meeting death in this way with all mental faculties intact, 'in a state of complete awareness and freedom', was a hallmark of being a good Jaina.¹ Any human who belonged to Jainism did not believe the practice of *Sallekhana* as suicide or death but as an prestigious act

that can help in scratching off the physical body to save the soul. But women were not encouraged to practice Sallekhana because of various reasons, the major among it was her physical body. But when it comes to the gender, in spite of the same religion and sect, the restrictions were transparent. In fact, when pursuing the texts, one finds a deep-seated prejudice aimed at the female body, especially its reproductive aspects, which ironically became the main reason why women allegedly could not practice the ritual of sallekhana.²

This article might also help in providing further scope in exploring the position and contribution of female jains during the ancient period of Tamil Nadu, as there is literary and archaeological evidence that reveals their participation.

Contribution and Position of Female Jains in Tamil Nadu

The table below mentions the contribution of women for the development of Jains during that period. These are majorly found from the inscriptional and literary evidence.

Donar	Period	Contribution	Location	Source
Sappamitta	1st century BCE	Donated Rock shelter to Jaina ascetics	Alagarmalai (Madurai)	Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions ³
Ilayar of Tenku Chirupocil	1st century CE	Donated Stone bed to Kavuti	Pudukkottai	Sittanavasal inscription ⁴
Kiran Kottiri	2nd century CE	Donated a hermitage along with stone seat	Pugalur (Coimbatore)	Record ⁵
Chekkanti-anni	4th century CE	Establishment of hermitage	Nekanurpatti	Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions ⁶
27 Kurathigal (Guru)	8th century CE	Missionary activities in South India	Kalugumalai	Vatelluthu inscriptions ⁷
Pattini Kurathi Adigal	871-907 CE		Arcot	Vilapakkam inscription
Kanakavira Kurattiyar	945 CE		Vellore	Vedal inscription
Gunandangi Kurathigal				Chitraral inscription

Madhavi	875 CE	Renovation of Perumpally & Monastery, Construction of sub shrine to Iyyaki Padari, Donated a giant bell	Tiruvannamalai	Sattamangalam inscription ⁸
Kundavai	10th century CE	Constructed Kundavai Jinalayam	Daddapuram (Villupuram)	Tamil Vattelluthu inscription ⁹
Chamunda Pai ¹⁰		Donated a lamp to Kundavai Jinalayam at Tirumala hills	Daddapuram (Villupuram)	Tamil Vattelluthu inscription
Ilaya Mani Nangai ¹¹	1024 CE	Donated holy lamp to Tirumala	Tirumala	Thirumalai inscription

From this table, it is very clear that women have played a prominent role in contributing and developing Jainism. Likewise, these inscriptions also mention the names of the Jain nuns who benefitted from these contributions. 'Kurattiyars' (mentioned in the table above) were the Jain nuns who were given the role of teachers or gurus, which shows the position of women in Tamil Nadu. They also took part in a variety of Jaina rituals, cults and ceremonies including witnessing and observing rituals like *Sallekhana*.¹²

Though Jain women were given higher positions, there were obstacles for the Jain women in certain aspects that were related to their behavior, dwelling and societal duties. There were restrictions in the movements of the Jain nuns which also involved monks to always accompany them. Consequently, these monks are obligated to guard the nuns not because they were literally their fathers, brothers, sons, or husbands (although this may sometimes have been the case), but because not doing so would cast aspersions on their own claims to moral strength, virtue, and manliness.¹³ This might have been advantageous at some perspective but they might have also been disadvantageous in contributing to their society and in practicing the rituals that were to be followed as a person belonging to the religion.

Self-Sacrifice in Jainism - *Sallekhana*

The concept of self-sacrifice can be observed from the ancient period. This practice was not particularly introduced by any individual or religion. The practice of self sacrificing was prevalent in many parts of the world for various reasons. In Jainism, this has been one of the ritual practices that is believed to be the path for attaining *moksha* (salvation).

Every Digambar *muni* (monk) expects that he will die by his own choice through *sallekhana*, the vow to end one's life by fasting. Both munis and laymen stressed that, this is not to be thought of as suicide. Rather the rule is that, when the monk becomes too infirm to pursue the ascetic life properly—as when his eyesight is too feeble to take care over small insects then he may choose to die.¹⁴

Suicide is broadly condemned as cowardice across the world's moral codes, though suicide under different rubrics—such as martyrdom, self-sacrifice, or self-immolation—is conferred a dynamic quality in a number of religious legends, some tragic and others uplifting.¹⁵ It can be understood that self-sacrifice is definitely not suicide. Every Jain before observing *Sallekhana*, has to follow certain principles that include due permission from their *guru*(s) and family. Likewise, this ritual cannot be practiced by forcing them as it is a systematic process of terminating their own lives.¹⁶ Unlike suicide, *Sallekhana* is not a sudden or instant death rather it takes many days, months or even years. This makes clear that *Sallekhana*, the practice of self-sacrifice or self-mortification is not suicide but was a ceremonial ritual in Jainism.

Practice of *Sallekhana* in Tamil Nadu

Sallekhana is supreme austerity (*tapa*) and results in immense karmic annihilation.¹⁷ This practice is also known as peaceful death, ritual death or voluntary death. *Sallekhana* is majorly practiced by Jains of any sect. In Tamil Nadu, the inscriptional and archaeological evidence helps in tracing the constant practice of this ritual dating back from 1st century CE till today.

Jainism is one of the oldest religions that existed in the ancient Tamilakam. It is believed that only the sect of Digambaras majorly found in Deccan or the south-Indian states. They followed all the principles and duties with no exception to geographic or regional changes.

Each fast is accompanied by a story, most of which are drawn from the southern Digambar purana literature.¹⁸ Tamil classics such as *Silappadikaram* refers to *Sallekhana* ritual, during the Sangam age, especially Kaundi Adigal. The Jain nun Kaundi Adigal provided companionship to Kovalan and his wife Kannagi in their arduous journey from Puhar to the fateful city of Madurai.

Hence Sallekhana or deaths by starvation are referred as “Vadakirutthal” (literally facing north direction) was quite prevalent during the Sangam age, probably copied from the Jain culture.¹⁹ The below mentioned are the verses from the *Sutra Prabha* of *Kundakund Acharaya*. These verses were found in the scriptures that were exclusively followed only by the Digambara sect of Jains. This scripture also puts forward the debate that women cannot attain salvation or liberation because of the reasons mentioned by him that are mentioned in his verses below,

6 According to the teaching of the Jina, a person wearing clothes cannot attain moksha even if he be a Tirthankara. The path of moksha consists of nudity (Nanga)

7 In the genital organs of women, in between their breasts, in their navels, and in the armpits, it is said there are very subtle living beings. How can there be the mendicant ordination (Pravrajya)

8 Women have no purity of mind; they are by nature fickle-minded. They have menstrual flows, there is no meditation for them free from anxiety.²⁰

Almost every Digambar fasts to some extent, and many take fasts which are repeated for ten or even sixteen years. Girls, and to a lesser extent boys, may begin an ameliorated version of fasting in late childhood or adolescence.²¹ Fasting is undertaken mostly, but by no means exclusively, by women.²² The female Jains were treated differently according to each sect. When it comes to the practice of *Sallekhana*, the sect of Svetambaras believed that any woman who practices this ritual can attain salvation. But, in Digambara sect, any women who observes *Sallekhana* was believed to take rebirth as male and again practice this ritual as men and so the liberation can be attained. Although there were difficulties in attaining salvation as women, they have stepped up and practiced *Sallekhana* during that period. This is the noteworthy aspect that was evident from this study.

Women Nisidhi in Tamil Nadu

The word *nisidhi* occurs in many Jaina inscriptions in both Kanarese and Sanskrit. In Sanskrit inscriptions, *nisidhi*, *nisadyakā* and *nisadhya* have been used out. In Kanarese inscriptions, it is variously spelt as *nisidi*, *nisidhi*, *nisidi*, *nisidhi*, *nisiddhi*, *nisidhige* and even *ništige*.²³

In the state of Tamil Nadu, a large number of *Nisidhi* hero stones can be observed. But the *Nisidhi* stones that were erected for women seem to be less in number compared with any other South Indian state. But these few *Nisidhi* hero stones do help in showing that women have also observed *Sallekhana* in the Tamil speaking regions.

Some of these women centric hero stones are seen in Kaniyampoondi, Kandachipuram, Vasanthi Krishnapuram, Ulliyampattu²⁴ and Vijayamangalam – that are located in Tiruvannamalai, and Villupuram and Erode districts respectively. The inscriptions and the evidence deciphered from these Nisidhi stones along with their location is explained briefly.

Kandachipuram²⁵

Three inscribed pillar slabs were discovered in the Mariyamman Koil Street in Villupuram district. These *Nisidhi* stones provide information about women who observed fasting till their deaths.

Inscription I:

Sva
stī srī
pāllu
ṭayān pe
ruṅkāṭan ma
kaḷ pokki
nōrra nōṇ
Pu

The above inscription speaks about *Pokki*, the daughter of *Perunkadan* belonging to Paalur, who voluntarily fasted till her death. Though the information about any ruler or a particular regnal year were not mentioned, with the help of the script and language in the inscription, the archaeologists and historians conclude that this hero stone belonged to 10th century CE.

Inscription II:

Srī kāra a(yu)
ṭaiyā
n peruma
llaṇ
makaḷ a
riyālē
nōrra'
Nonpu

This inscription talks about *Ariyaal*, the daughter of *Perumallan* belonging to a place named Kaarai, who observed *Nisidhi* and died. In memory of this woman, a stone pillar was erected and the above inscription was carved. The characters of the script used for the inscription helped the Hero stone to be dated to the 10th century CE.

Inscription III:

Svasti
srī pāl
lu
ṭayān ma
ravan maka
ḷ nācci
nōrra
nōnpu

This inscription describes the woman named *Naachi*, the daughter of *Maravan* belonging to Paalur, who sacrificed her life by fasting until death. This *Nisidhi* stone also belonged to the 10th century CE, dated with the help of the script in the inscription.

Kaniyampoondi²⁶

A *Nisidhi* stone was uncovered near Veerabhadra temple in Kaniyampoondi village which is located at Thiruvannamalai district. This stone slab bears the inscription about a woman who sacrificed her life by practising *Nisidhi*. Here the woman named *Nangaiyana Petral* was the daughter of *Andraal*. This stone also bears the miniature icons such as the *kuthu vilakku* (ceremonial standing lamp), *kudam* and a *kumbam*. From this, it can be assumed that these icons were etched because of the influence of the other religions during that period and also to deify the person to whom the hero stone is erected. The inscription in Kaniyampoondi bears the following,

Svastisrī
ānrāl
makaḷ
naṅkai āna
(pe)rrāl nōrra
nōnpu

Vasanthā Krishnapuram²⁷

A *Nisidhi* stone belonging to the 10th century CE was discovered in front of the Mariyamman temple located at Vasanthā Krishnapuram. This hero stone gives information about the woman named *Shree Brahmani Yechil Nangai*, the wife of Valikamban, who fasted unto death. The inscription bears the following words,

Svasti
srī pīrāma
ṇi ecci
l naṅkai
vali kampa
n akamu
ṭaiyāl
nōrra
nōṇpu

Uliyampattu²⁸

This *Nisidhi* stone belongs to a woman named *Sori*, the wife of *Kadanthai Vaniyan Sri Marundhan* (a trader belonging to the place named Kadanthai, which is now known as Ponnagadam near Virudhachalam), who fasted unto death. This *Nisidhi* stone has been erected during the period of Rajathi Raja, during his seventh regnal year in 1113 AD. The inscriptions in this *Nisidhi* stone bears the following words,

Srīrāja
ātirāja tē
vaṅku yāṇ
ṭēlāva
tu kaṭantai
vāṇiyan ci
maruntanaka
muṭaiyāl
cōri nōṇpu

Vijayamangalam (*Puliyappai*)

A *sallekhana* stone was discovered in Shri Chandra Praba temple located at Vijayamangalam, Erode district. In this pillar inscription, the information about a woman who observed *sallekhana* was etched in the back along with miniature pillar icons carved in the front along with a *tirthankara* in a seated posture and a woman seated showing the *anjali mudra* (salutation gesture) can be seen below.

Svastisrī
cāmunṭa
rājan
Taṅkai

pulī
appai
nicīṭikai

Kal

This inscription mentions about Samundaraya, one of the military generals and a minister of the Ganga dynasty, who installed the famous sculpture of Bahubali (Gomateswara) in Shravanabelagola and he had a sister named Puliyappai who fasted unto death to attain liberation in this place.

Conclusion

The Jain women had equal status and responsibility in the contribution to society. But as an individual, Jain women were not given the independent status compared to the men. Their feminine features, physical and mental behavior as women have been considered as a distraction to perform not only their own duties but to the Jain monks and laymen too. This has hugely impacted the female Jain to lack in ritual practices. This restriction can be assumed as one of the major reasons for the very few archaeological finds such as *Nisidhi* hero stones that belonged to Jain women.

The Jain community always believed that *Sallekhana* was one of the prestigious ways to choose the path of death. Though there was less evidence that supports this act of observing fasting by women during that period, it did not vanish or diminish at any period of time.

Even now, the vows and practice of this ritual are being taken by many elderly women in Tamil Nadu as evidenced by a few instances such as when an 83 year old Marudevi Ammal who died after observing *sallekhana* for 42 days or when, an 83 year old women named Supranava Mathi practiced *Nisidhi* and passed away²⁹ or when a 72 year old woman named Sri Sugunthanmathi Mathaji, fasted for 7 days and died in Tiruvannamalai district.³⁰ It is clear that people even today believe in these practices and also observe them because the Jains themselves claim that *Sallekhana* is the most ideal, peaceful and satisfying form of death.³¹

Nisidhi is not only considered a religious practice but also as a societal practice as this is not only followed in Jainism but also in other religions. Any courageous act that resulted in the loss of life is a heroic deed that appeals to the commemoration of a stone with inscriptions or sculptures erected and carved respectively according to the evolution of human knowledge despite any creed or religion. Hence, these hero stones act as archaeological findings and primary sources that stand as evidence in understanding the ancient societal norms and practices.

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